Reclaiming a Writing Voice as a New Teacher Educator: SoTL as Portal

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Keywords
Reflective practice, Scholarly writing, Voice, Faculty development

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Reclaiming a Writing Voice as a New Teacher Educator: SoTL as Portal

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Abstract
This essay explores the author’s self-directed experience of re-claiming a writing voice as a new teacher educator in a faculty of education after many years as a practitioner in public school systems. The benefits of an increased understanding of SoTL became critical to the individual’s own development as a member of faculty, specifically in overcoming obstacles encountered in writing for academic audiences. Presenting reflections on experience, notes, and journal entries over time, the piece offers insight into one individual’s struggles in transitioning to sustained ‘scholarly’ writing for publication, but also suggests this is not an unfamiliar tale. The author concludes there is much more that could be done to mentor and support the ongoing development of academic writing and the work of new scholars.

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Introduction
This paper explores reflections on my own experience with academic writing following the completion of my doctoral dissertation and after accepting a tenure-track position at a faculty of education. With the personal/professional perspective of someone who joined the academy later in my career as an educator, reflective practice has enabled me to better understand the influence of my experience on the continuous work of my ‘being and becoming’ a teacher educator.

While some commonly cited reasons for not writing, e.g., not being able to find the time, needing to find larger chunks of time, needing thinking time before writing, and worrying about the quality and quantity of writing (Peseta, 2009), were most definitely a part of my dilemma as a writer during my first three years as a new member of the education faculty, they were by no means the whole story. Rather, in retrospect, there were three identifiable and recurring tensions that played significant roles in my experience, en route to a better understanding of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and its particular relevance for me as a researcher, scholar, and writer. Some challenges and opportunities specifically related to academic writing consistently encountered in my first years as a full-time professor revolved primarily around a) fulfilling the need to write for academia as an integral part of both professional learning and ongoing career development; b) finding a balance between my time spent ‘reading’ and ‘writing’; and, essentially, c) the process of reclaiming my own ‘voice’ as a writer. I was spending a great deal of time thinking and worrying about writing, and acutely felt I had lost my writer’s voice and a level of confidence with which I used to write on a regular basis.
Towards a Writing Life in the Academy

As I reflect on my first three years as a professor and browse through one of my notebooks - one that began in July 2007 at the International Study Association on Teachers and Teaching (ISATT) Conference held at Brock University, I find all kinds of notes related to a number of fascinating presentations attended over time, but very few of these notes made the transition out of the pages of my notebook and into my research and/or writing. There are jottings about ideas for my own potential research in the area of professional identity (e.g., contextual, experiential, and biographical factors?); developing and enacting a pedagogy of teacher education (e.g., notes on how patterns of teaching and learning are profoundly cultural and a potential question for further exploration: How can I expect my teacher candidates to buy into what I am doing if they are unaware of why I am doing it?).

I find notes from a thought provoking session (and personal conversation) with Keith Trigwell on his research into quality university teaching and learning, and realize the International Study Association on Teachers and Teaching (ISATT) conference was probably one of my earliest introduction to the potential of SoTL in my own work. The notebook also contains thought-provoking jottings from Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE at UBC in May/June, 2008), the 2nd Working Conference on Teacher Education (at Queen’s University in November, 2008), and both AERA (in San Diego, April 2009) and CSSE (at Carleton in May, 2009) when my attention was finally beginning to turn to serious consideration of framing my work as SoTL via the self-study of teacher education practices (or ‘S-STEP’).

A journal entry from February/09 served to provide much needed insight into my predicament after reading Georgia Heard (1995). She asks her reader to consider a critical question: What are the rocks in your current writing life? A great question for me at that time! Attempts to identify and write about my own inner critics quickly recognized me, myself, and I as my biggest critic of all and I continued to write, as follows:

.... I see this in terms of my writing and potential interest to others – i.e., who would be interested (in what I have to say) anyway? I notice I am leap-frogging right over, in that one statement, the intent of writing to figure out what I think/feel/know/have learned for myself first... then comes the work of writing towards clarity – “sorting, eventually, things out” – writing first so that I can re-read, clarify, reflect, re-think etc... and, in time, share with others – “going public”... But I’m really beginning to see that perhaps what I have to say about my own learning to teach (at the faculty), and my teaching of (others who are) learning to teach has rich potential in terms of the scholarship of teaching and learning....

Thus evolved a gradual easing out of what I regard as a virtual paralysis of my voice as a writer and educational researcher. Figuratively speaking I now regard my writer’s voice as having been smothered under acquired patterns of behaviour I knew were not helping; but I also knew I needed to locate some kind of a guide beyond my own initiative to help in writing my way out of the ‘paralysis’ problem. Reflecting on my own experience, I can’t help wondering how many other new scholars find themselves in similar situations, and I would like to know more about how they find their way (back?) into their writing lives....
The Portal to SoTL: An Epiphany!

The resolution of these problems really began during an informal conversation with a colleague at another conference in May/08 (where I lamented the struggle I was having to integrate my knowledge and experience from my former professional life with my current one, and how conceptions of ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ at the faculty seemed so disparate). My colleague listened patiently and then recommended I explore Boyer’s work (1990) and the realm of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Very soon afterwards, this timely nudge resulted in my delving wholeheartedly into the literature and the discovery of Boyer’s fourfold vision of scholarship, representing a highly significant turning point in my own development as a teacher educator, researcher, and writer. It was, in fact, something of an epiphany! An entry in my journal dated July 28/08 reads as follows:

Aha! I am coming to a more informed recognition of the way to proceed... Not necessary to adhere to a false dichotomy of “teaching” and “research” in separate corners. Rather, that my experience as a practitioner can be capitalized upon and brought into (and continuously improve) my current role at the faculty by privileging my teaching (and learning) as scholarship and building on knowledge around further distinctions between scholarly teaching and scholarship... the framework of SoTL aligns, in my mind, so well with concerns related to my career trajectory and my ‘becoming a teacher educator’ that I believe it can only enhance, rather than further fragment, my ability to focus – thus gaining greater clarity in my teaching, research, and (ability to) write...

Boyer’s model resonated with me, and opened up whole new ways of thinking about my role(s) as a teacher educator, researcher, and ‘scholarly’ writer. The paradigm he presented of four overlapping and interdependent scholarships (teaching and learning; discovery; engagement; and integration) became a pathway I began to follow and to learn more about, and one that helped a great deal to lead me out of my writer’s ‘paralysis’. For example, the argument that faculty must assume primary responsibilities for giving scholarship a richer and more vital meaning enabled me to better understand how my work as both a teacher and a researcher do, quite naturally, overlap and could also result in ‘scholarly’ writing. I was also to find clarification in researching definitions of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) vs. Scholarly Teaching, and to understand that while these are closely related, they differ in both intent and outcome. For example, as Smith (2001) writes:

Although all faculty should strive for scholarly teaching, not all will engage in the scholarship of teaching. One of the essential differences between the two is the degree of interest in the wider implications and impact of the results.

It is not an understatement to suggest my newly minted understanding of the definition of scholarly activities (as related to SoTL) was an eye-opener in more ways than one. Further reading of Shulman’s work (2004) assisted me in understanding the three characteristics of scholarly activity cited, i.e., (going) public; being susceptible to critical review and evaluation; and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one’s scholarly community. To quote, “can be cited, refuted, built upon, and shared among members of that community. Scholarship properly communicated and critiqued serves as the building block for knowledge growth in the field” (Shulman, 2004 b), p. 193). This too just made so much sense to me, and in ways I had not thought about research and writing before (or had my attention drawn, as a new scholar, in quite the same way by others).
My new found consideration of documenting and analyzing my teaching as a way to write about what I was already doing – in ways that would involve rigorous analysis, reflection, critical examination, integration, and re-interpretation – provided a useful framework within which to work. This structure also enabled me to integrate Standards for Scholarly Work (Glassick, Huber, & Maerof, 1997) into my thinking about researching my own teaching and writing this up for publication. Glassick et al. make clear that whether it is inquiry, teaching, integration, or engagement, to be scholarly, work must satisfy the following six criteria: Clear goals; Adequate preparation; Appropriate methods; Significant results; Effective presentation; and Reflective critique. In summary, SoTL has provided me with a constructive framework and the guidance I needed to look for authentic opportunities “…to step back and think about what has been learned and how to represent that understanding in ways that will make persuasive good sense to others…” (Shulman, 2004 b), p. 201). I was thus looking at research and academic writing with fresh eyes, and this, in turn, directly led to 1) my having something to write about and 2) a vivid sense of reclaiming my writer’s voice.

Reclaiming My Voice as a Writer

The ongoing process of actually completing more pieces of ‘scholarly’ writing during the past year (my fourth year at the faculty), has further assisted me in grasping a clearer understanding of what led to my focus on reading and attending conferences as a presenter (and hearing about the work of others), as opposed to confidently moving ahead and writing for presentation and publication.

In the writing of this paper, I examined notes and journal entries and revisited the many academic conference presentations I continued to make but, again, did not take to the next step of submitting for publication. Writing, for me, had become the (often) painful experience of getting thoroughly stuck with my own research and writing. How had this happened? In thinking about this I am reminded of a conversation that allegedly took place between the dancer and choreographer Martha Graham and a beginning choreographer (identity unknown). The beginning choreographer had asked Graham how she would know if her work was “good enough” and ready to share? Graham’s response was, to paraphrase, that “whether or not it was good was not for you to say, but to just channel what you have out there, and see what comes back to you.”

Further perusal of my notes, journal entries, other work in process to date (and a quick glance around my office), tell me I too have lacked confidence in my own ability as a writer to identify and produce ‘good’ work – especially in comparison to so much of what I was reading and hearing about from other sources. I did not take the necessary steps to narrow my focus sufficiently and enable myself to find a starting point. Rather, I allowed myself to get caught up in the smorgasbord of possibilities and fascinating stuff out there – and kept reading about writing instead of actually writing. Again, in retrospect, I clearly see the notion of whether I had something I knew enough about to write about, or could produce something “good enough” to actually risk sharing with others, greatly restricted my ability to proceed with my writing. There was never any shortage of ideas but, initially, very little was getting drafted and subsequently shaped into copy for review and potential publication. Thus, I too, just needed to channel and see what came back to me.

I must admit I was learning a great deal about academic writing by volunteering to read and evaluate the work of peers (e.g., peer review of papers and proposals for conference presentations and awards). However, once again, while I see these experiences were
beneficial up to a point, this learning was not translating into productivity in terms of my own writing.

Reading and continuing to learn more about SoTL provided a critical turning point as it has served to facilitate my thinking about the related challenges I was encountering with research and writing through a different lens. After beginning to frame my work in terms of SoTL I was able to set realistic and tangible goals for myself as a writer – goals that helped me to get down to the business of writing rather than thinking and/or reading about it. Today, I continue to return to these goals as ‘touchstones’ to keep me on track – and to keep my writer’s voice from getting lost again:

- To achieve greater clarity and focus in my work re. teaching and learning
- To present and write about what I’m doing as a teacher educator
- To continue to develop my understanding of SoTL through reading and writing, and to network with others locally, nationally, and internationally

At the time of writing, happily, I’m able to say my writer’s voice has begun to return, and feels strong and confident once again. As a direct result, I have already experienced some more positive results – for example, work that has been published recently (Elliott-Johns, 2009, 2010a; Elliott-Johns & Booth, 2009), and I have several other articles that are currently under review or in press. Work currently under review includes an article based on my doctoral dissertation (Elliott-Johns, 2004), a piece on building cultures conducive to professional learning in the pre-service classroom, and another on responsive teacher education that promotes literacy for all. I have also completed two invited chapters that will be published in 2012. Beyond learning about academic writing from my evaluations of the work of others, I am now receiving detailed, constructive feedback from peer reviews of my own work – and these are contributing enormously to my ongoing development as a writer.

In May, 2009 I was invited to present a peer-reviewed paper at Opportunities and New Directions: A Research Conference on Teaching and Learning, held at the University of Waterloo by the Centre for Teaching Excellence. The paper shared my research in teaching and learning strategies currently used to promote students’ more active engagement with assigned readings – research that relates directly to my own work in faculty of education classrooms. Attendees were other university and college teachers from a wide variety of disciplines who were also interested in learning how they might incorporate the strategies presented into their own teaching. This was an ideal opportunity for me to write and present a paper at a conference that welcomed scholarly research on teaching, and that paper was also recently published in a book resulting from that conference (Elliott-Johns, 2010b).

What Have I Learned?

While I was well aware of many of the reasons explored in this paper for the seeming ‘paralysis’ of my writer’s voice, as a new member of faculty but an experienced educator, I was not as well equipped as I anticipated being in resolving my own struggles with productivity and scholarly writing. As a result, I feel I spent considerably more time than I would have liked to, basically on my own, navigating unfamiliar terrain in the search for support and a better sense of direction. In essence, my “self-mitigated overwhelm”, as described in my reflections on spending too much time reading about writing instead of writing, could only be partially alleviated by strains of Sean Connery’s voice (Finding Forrester) reverberating in my head, “Don’t think, write!”
I consider myself to be a highly pro-active, resourceful problem solver, and this period represents a frustrating time for me as I struggled to make sense of what was happening and how to move my work forward. I can’t help but speculate it might not have taken me three years to ‘reclaim’ my voice as a writer if more tangible support and guidance for the development of my academic writing had been available. Dissatisfaction in this regard comes through loud and clear in the following journal entry from August/08, soon after my ‘discovering’ source materials and the incredible encouragement and direction offered by a growing understanding of SoTL:

.... doing so much more reading and reflecting on literature uncovered in the past few days – Shulman to Kreber – Boyer – IAST – SoTL – Learning Commons and back again... but unfortunate that some direction in this isn’t more readily available to ‘new’ faculty of education members here? I mean, a focus on SoTL?? I know I feel I have largely had to cast around and navigate a path for myself, driven by intrinsic propellers and self-determination. For example, why were 5 major resources I have accessed this summer not available in either or the Library or through the Teaching/Learning Centre???

... One seems to have to navigate a ‘trial and error’ approach to discovery and enlightenment... doesn’t make sense to me. Much gathered that I think will help to shape and inform my thinking – and productivity. What I find really exciting is the sense of the familiar (study of ‘teaching’!) and yet a new departure too in terms of understanding how to frame as scholarly research on teaching... and the dissemination of findings...

Maryellen Weimer’s Teaching Professor Blog and the Teaching Professor Newsletter were two of the five resources to which I refer in this my journal entry. I subscribe to both these publications and they have been invaluable resources in terms of the scholarly presentation of ideas for university/college teaching, and as models of succinct pieces of academic writing – with the added bonus of a focus on SoTL. Once again, though, I would like to have located and had access to these publications more readily and much earlier.

In my own experience as a new member of faculty, opportunities to work with others and to collaborate on writing were not easily found. I was somewhat envious of colleagues in other locations who would talk about how they had “lucked in” to like-minded colleagues and/or mentors (and appeared, to me, to be writing up a storm as a result). I am encouraged as I do see some long held and often less than positive attitudes towards ‘collaboration’ in the academy as a whole gradually changing, (for example, at my own institution with the advent of major revisions to the criteria for Tenure and Promotion). This, for me, is a welcome direction in which to move and I am now involved in two collaborative research projects at my university... so perhaps it also just takes time?

Further afield, I have forged links with some very rewarding collaborative networks and alliances across the country and internationally (generally speaking, the results of active membership in scholarly organizations (e.g., STLHE, ISSOTL, CSSE, AERA, CATE and ISATT). These experiences have provided a much-needed broader community and opportunities for professional learning as a teacher educator and productive writer. Initially, joining any kind of research collaborative or writing support group appeared limited due to geography and other logistics. But Canadian boundaries were recently transcended after I received an invitation to join a collaborative research project (in self-study of teacher...
education practices (S-STEP)) with three colleagues all located in the U.S. – in Utah, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. We have since had collaboratively written proposals accepted to present our work at AERA in Denver, April 2010, CSSE in Montreal, June 2010, and at the Castle Conference in the U.K. in August 2010, and we are currently working on writing a collaborative journal article.

Final Thoughts

After completing an initial draft of this paper, I encountered Peseta’s fascinating article (2010), a thought provoking piece that addresses some far murkier issues in the territory underlying explorations of writing as teachers and researchers in the academy. I now recognize a large part of my own recent struggles with writing as also resonating with what Pietas refers to as the ways in which our disciplinary training prepares us to think of academic writing in particular ways, and to also see ourselves as writers in the academy in particular ways. Thus, I think my own writer’s voice was somewhat stifled for a time partly as a result of pre-conditions and ‘external’ expectations of being a new member of faculty, illustrating essentially what Brett (1991) regarded as ‘The Bureaucratization of Writing’:

University academics do not write to persuade but to impress and gain approval within a hierarchy. They are trained to write for approval. From their student essays to their PhD theses, they are writing to be submitted for examination. And even when they have received their PhDs, they must submit work to refereed journals in order to accumulate the publications necessary for appointment… and then promotion and so on. At every point, their writing is subjected to external criteria – approved topics, accepted methods of research and styles of writing, the norms and conventions of the discipline (p. 520).

Perhaps (albeit naively?), I had really not anticipated what Brett talks about to be as problematic as it actually turned out to be. However, from my current perspective, a pre-occupation with and an over-emphasis on ‘acceptable’ writing for the academy was exerting a powerful influence over my ability to write anything at all in terms of what would be deemed ‘scholarship’. Furthermore, Brett suggests two good sources of academic writing that are also hampered by a bureaucracy as being a) discouraging faculty from conceptualizing a ‘public’ beyond their discipline (because they are not trained to do so) and b) discouraging faculty writing from their own subjectivity (as a result of being trained to distrust it):

Academic writing unfolds within the concerns of the institution, the discipline and the career, rather than the lived-life. It is writing that never leaves school, that never grows beyond the judging, persecuting eye of the parent to enter into a dialogue with the society and culture of its time, as an adult among adults, with all the acceptance of mutual imperfection which this implies. Always seeking the approval of a higher authority, the academic writer endlessly defers responsibility (p. 521).

The reflections shared here trace my own personal/professional learning as a ‘new’ teacher educator and scholar, my own deferral of responsibility at times, and the eventual reclaiming of my voice as a writer. In all, I regard my growing appreciation for what SoTL offered me as a framework for pursuing further teaching and research that I can also publish as ‘scholarly’ work as a game-changer.
While the experiences reported here are my own, I also find myself wondering what happens at other institutions to facilitate the professional learning of new faculty members? Furthermore, how much support is afforded to those interested in SoTL in terms of assisting new scholars to study and write about teaching and learning?

Increasingly, it is being recognized we cannot merely assume that because someone has a teaching background and a Ph.D. that they will be an effective teacher educator and/or that the requirements for success as a teacher and researcher are going to automatically “fall into place” (Bullock, 2009). But what kinds of professional development are put in place to support such experienced educators, but also new teacher educators/scholars? Based on my own experience, more specifically, how are they assisted with the complexities and challenges of academic writing? And how might engagement with SoTL assist in these endeavours?

I believe answers to some important questions might help to shed light on the experiences of other faculty members in this regard. For example, how might professional learning resources be shared more effectively? How might faculty be encouraged to collaborate and share their experiences in supportive environments, for example, their struggles and successes with writing? How might new faculty be encouraged to learn from their peers and other, more experienced, faculty members? What kinds of creative approaches have been found to mentor and support the ongoing development of academic writing and the work of new scholars?

These are all examples of questions posed in relation to my experience as a new scholar and teacher educator struggling to reclaim my ‘voice’ as a writer in the academy. Further research needs to explore and document the experiences of other teacher educators (and members of faculty who are not necessarily teacher educators) – and examine their experiences in efforts to be successful academic writers. In turn, these studies might provide valuable insights for faculty members, deans, and directors of research concerned with the recruitment, retention, and mentoring of new scholars.

References


